

Module 2: Firm Grip

Additional Reading:

A Summary of The Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

The theological method of John Wesley, synthesized into quadrilateral form, helped shape Methodism. Wesley's theological method involved the interplay between scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, with the Bible always serving as the final authority. Richard Lovelace pictures it using a baseball diamond. "Home plate is Scripture. The first base is tradition. Second base is reason and third base experience."¹ In order to adequately interpret a passage--hit a home run--one must begin at home plate and touch all the bases before returning to scripture.²

To change the metaphor, if the Bible is the lode from which gold is mined, the other three are furnaces in which that gold is purified. The purpose is refinement, the perfection of that which has been discovered. Wesley saw these four elements as integral to a proper understanding of the Bible. While not all four were systematically employed each time he interpreted a passage, Wesley considered no interpretation sound if it could not stand up to the heat from all the furnaces.

SCRIPTURE

Wesley's words in his preface to "Sermons of Several Occasions" are well known: "O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri," a man of one book.³

REASON

Reason occupied an important role in Wesley's theological method. While he was very conscious of the dangers of rationalism, he maintained that the truths of Christianity were rational and that there was no essential contradiction between reason and faith. Methodists

¹ Richard Lovelace, "Recovering Our Balance," *Charisma*, August, 1987, 80, as quoted in Thorsen 72.

² A. D. Thorsen's *The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience as a Model of Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury-Zondervan, 1990), 72.

³ John Wesley, preface, *Sermons on Several Occasions* (London: Epworth Press, 1944 [1787]) vi.

were insistent, he said, “that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that religion and reason go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion.”⁴

TRADITION

Tradition was very important to Wesley and how he sought to highlight the connections between his renewal movement and the early church. He valued it for reflecting “both the intellectual content and the spiritual vitality of Christian faith.” It was this appreciation for tradition that enabled Wesley to maintain his catholic, tolerant spirit.⁵

EXPERIENCE

“Many consider Wesley’s insights into experience as a source of religious authority as one of his greatest contributions to the development of Christian theology.”⁶ While aware of the limitations of experience, he found reason and tradition to be essential checks to maintain a proper balance.

⁴ John Wesley, “To Dr. Rutherford,” 28 March 1768, Letters (Telford ed.),

⁵ 364, as quoted in Thorsen 169.

⁶ Thorsen 201.